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ABSTRACT

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Aggressive Behavior of Anglo- and Mexican-Americans Toward High- and Low-Status Sources of Frustration

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Running head: Aggressive Behavior of Anglo- and Mexican-Americans

Abstract

Seventy-two unselected male and female Anglo- and Mexican-American drivers found their progress blocked by a car that failed to move after a traffic light turned green. These experimental trials were systematically varied among six intersections in a city of dual ethnic population. Half the subjects in each ethnic class were frustrated by an old (low status) experimental car; the others by a new, expensive (high status) model. Patterns of aggressive horn-honking directed toward the high- and low-status sources of frustration were elicited and tested by Chi-square analyses. Findings were that overall aggression did not differ from levels reported in the antecedent study; that Mexican-Americans displayed more total aggression than did Anglo-Americans; and, at variance with the published study, Mexican-Americans displayed greater aggression toward the high-status source of frustration.

Aggressive Behavior of Anglo- and Mexican Americans Toward High- and Low-Status Sources of Frustration

Man is aggressive. Whether aggressive tendencies are innate, whether they develop as a result of learning experiences, or whether they represent failure of development of higher capabilities for selfless behavior is a controversy expressive of different views of the basic nature of man. All major theorists agree, however, on two aspects of aggression--that aggressive acts are associated with frustration; and that social factors play an important role in the control of overt aggression, and in the manner of its expression when it occurs.

Most empirical studies of aggression have used animal subjects, or human subjects in laboratory or contrived situations. Numerous authors (e.g. Orne, 1962) have addressed problems such as demand characteristics, experimenter bias, and the fact that the laboratory itself is a social situation which may affect behaviors of interest. A major specific of the laboratory's limitation in studying human aggression in society is found in the concept of attribution. The relationship between frustration and aggression is markedly influenced by the person's perception of the reason for the frustration--not simply that someone is thwarting goal attainment or blocking progress, but <u>why</u> is he doing it? A number

of studies (e.g. Epstein & Taylor, 1967) have found diminished aggression when the frustration is attributed to resonable or otherwise acceptable purposes. These considerations suggest that laboratory studies may not be useful in understanding real life behaviors in frustrating social situations.

The field experiment provides an improvement in methodology particularly suitable to overcome such limitations. The experimenter provides the stimulus and maintains adequate control. Since the subject does not know that his behavior is being observed, his response is more natural and spontaneous (Bickman & Henchy, 1972). A further advantage of the field experiment is that the subject is never personally identifiable, is not deceived by the experimenter, and, in proper usage, is never placed in unusual stress. As such, the field experiment has never been criticised on ethical grounds--a major consideration in the conduct of human subject research (Davis, Note 1).

Doob and Gross (1968) conducted a field experiment of social factors in human aggression, dealing primarily with the effects of differential status levels of the frustrating stimulus complex. At selected intersections in two California cities, they contrived to block the progress of subjects who were driving in light traffic. Subject's honking at the blocking car was taken as the operational measure of

aggression, and a latency of response was also recorded. The status of the frustrator was experimentally manipulated by varying the quality of the experimental car. They found that both males and females displayed more aggression toward the low status frustrator than toward the high status vehicle. Even though this experiment dealt with social factors, and even though carried out in a bi-cultural area, the authors did not note, or did not report, any cultural factors in this expression of aggressive behaviors.

The purpose of the present experiment was to conduct an essential replication of the Doob and Gross (1968) study, to determine whether their findings apply to the bi-cultural area of South Texas, and to extend their methodology to the study of ethnic differences in aggressive behavior toward high and low status sources of frustration. The area studied is characterized by approximately equal numbers of Anglo- and Mexican-Americans, but the history and current social definitions are that the Mexican-Americans are the minority in terms of influence, power structure, and opportunity. There has been a long established stereotyping of the Mexican-American as slow-moving, passive, and relatively unaggressive, often referred to as having a "manana" approach to life. Whether ethnic membership and these social definitions are factors in the expression of aggression, and whether such aggression is expressed differentially toward high and low

status sources of frustration, has not been empirically determined.

The specific problems investigated were, under the stated conditions, do South Texas subjects, as a whole or within either ethnic group, display differential rates of aggression toward high and low status frustrators? Are there ethnic differences in overall levels of aggression? Are there ethnic differences in aggression toward low status sources of frustration? Toward high status sources of frustration? The null hypotheses are that there are no differences in aggression attributable to any of these factors.

Method

Subjects. There were 36 subjects in each status-of-frustrator condition. Subjects blocked by the low status car were 7 male and 16 female Anglo-Americans; 9 male and 4 female Mexican-Americans. In the high status condition were 11 male and 10 female Anglo-Americans; 10 males and 5 females were Mexican-Americans. The treatment of participants was in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Apparatus. The same driver (appropriately dressed for his high and low status role) was employed throughout the experiment; the same intersections were used for presentation of high and low status treatment conditions; and tests were run on consecutive days, with time of day controlled to avoid

rush hours and school times. In the present experiment the high status frustrator (blocking vehicle) was a late model Buick Electra 225 fourdoor hardtop sedan, washed and polished for the occasion. The low status frustrator was a 1949 Ford coupe with faded paint. The six intersections were selected to provide a red light sufficiently long to insure that potential subjects would come to a complete stop behind the experimental car; relatively light traffic so that a single car would be impeded by the experimental car; and a narrow street so that it would be difficult for the subject to drive around the car blocking him. Equal numbers of high and low status trials were run at each intersection.

Procedure. The experiment was designed to present a frustration, in the form of a car blocking progress after a traffic light turned green, to unselected drivers at six intersections in Kingsville, Texas. Procedures followed the methodology utilized by Doob and Gross (1968) except that the same driver (appropriately dressed for his high and low status role) was employed throughout the test.

The experimenter timed the signal cycle to allow the red light to stop him, with no vehicle between him and the light. When another vehicle stopped behind the experimenter's car, the driver became the subject for that trial. The experimenter unobtrusively noted the apparent age range, sex, number of passengers, and classified the subject's ethnic

identity by visual characteristics. Drivers not readily classifiable as Anglo- or Mexican-American (Asian Indian students, Blacks, or anyone of doubtful classification) were excluded and that trial was aborted. The year, make, and model of the subject's car was also recorded. When the light turned to green, the experimenter started a stopwatch, noted whether the subject honked once, twice, or not at all, and recorded the latency of each honk. The experimenter moved on after the second honk, or, if no honk occurred, waited for 15 seconds and then moved. Number of and latency of honks directed toward the blocking car, taken as the operational measure of aggression, were compiled by sex and ethnic identity of subjects, and by status condition, for comparison with published results and for analysis of ethnic differences in aggression.

Results

Although they present a number of other measures, Doob and Gross (1968) state that "The clearest way of looking at the results is in terms of the percentage in each condition that honked at least once in 12 seconds" (p. 216). Accordingly, present data of primary interest were numbers in each sex-by-ethnic classification and treatment condition who honked at least once in the first 12 seconds of experimental delay, and those who did not. These results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Aggression by Anglo- and Mexican-American Males and Females in Response to High and Low Status Sources of Frustration

Anglo-American

	Low Status Condition			High Status Condition		
	Agg.	Non-Agg.	N	Agg.	Non-Agg.	N
Male	3	4	7	5	6	11
Female	8	8	16	2	8	10
Total	11	12	23	7	14	21

Mexican-American

	Low Status Condition			High Status Condition		
	Agg.	Non-Agg.	N	Agg.	Non-Agg.	N
Male	6	3	9	8	2	10
Female	3	1	4	4	1	5
Total	9	4	13	12	3	15

Chi-square analysis, with Yates correction where appropriate (Popham, 1967) was employed to test the significance of observed differences in aggression. Preliminary analyses revealed that males and females do not differ in aggression toward high and low status frustrators, within or across ethnic membership $\underline{X}^2$ (3) = 2.26, $\underline{p} > .05$. Observations of males and females were combined for all further analyses.

The first question asked was whether different levels of aggression are elicited by these frustrations in South Texas than in California when sex, ethnic identity, and

status of frustrator are controlled. In the antecedent study, 50 of 74 subjects aggressed; 24 did not. Present findings were that 39 aggressed and 33 did not. These differences are not significant statistically, $\underline{X}^2$ (1) = 2.229, $\underline{p} > .05$. It was concluded that overall aggression levels within the two subject populations do not differ.

The next question is concerned with whether differential aggression is exhibited toward low and high status sources of frustration when ethnic identity is disregarded. In this condition in the published study, 84% of all subjects aggressed toward the low status frustrator; 50% aggressed toward the high status car, an observed difference found to be significant at the .01 level. In the present study, a total of 20 subjects (56%) displayed aggression in the low status condition; and 19 subjects (53%) did so when the source of frustration was symbolic of high status. This difference is not significant statistically, $\underline{X}^2$ (1) = 0.00, $\underline{p} > .05$. Further analysis revealed that neither ethnic group aggressed differentially toward high and low status sources of frustrations, $\underline{X}^2$ (1,1) = .47, .04, $\underline{p} > .05$. It was concluded that, at variance with the California study, South Texas subjects do not aggress differentially toward high and low status sources of frustration.

The next analysis dealt with whether there are ethnic differences in overall levels of frustration, when sex is

disregarded and status of frustrator is controlled. Findings were that 18 of 44 Anglo-Americans aggressed; 26 did not. Among Mexican-Americans there were 21 instances of aggressive behavior; 7 of non-aggressive behavior. Analysis revealed that these observed differences are statistically significant, $\underline{X}^2$ (1) = 7.99, $p < .01$. This finding was that there are ethnic differences in overall aggression levels, in the direction of greater aggression displayed by Mexican- than by Anglo-Americans.

To discover the exact nature of the differences that exist between ethnic groups in aggression levels, but which do not appear in other comparisons, further analyses of Anglo- and Mexican-American responses to each frustrating situation were performed. The low status car evoked aggressive responses from 11 of 23 Anglo-Americans; and from 9 of 13 Mexican-Americans. While these observations are in the direction of greater aggression by Mexican-Americans, these differences are not significant, $\underline{X}^2$ (1) = .9047, $p > .05$. Analysis of ethnic differences in aggression toward the high status source of frustration revealed that 7 of 21 Anglo-Americans aggressed; 14 did not. Among Mexican-Americans, 12 of 15 aggressed in this high status condition; 3 did not. These differences were significant, $\underline{X}^2$ (1) = 5.62, $p < .02$. The finding was that Mexican-Americans display more aggression toward high status sources of frustration than do Anglo-

Americans. This analysis also reveals that the "inhibiting effect" of high status sources of frustration reported by Doob and Gross (1968) is, for Mexican-Americans only, reversed in the present study.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to extent the Doob and Gross (1968) study of differential aggression toward high and low status sources of frustration to the bi-cultural area of South Texas, and to assess ethnic factors in the expression of aggression. Source of frustration was systematically varied between high and low status cars which blocked progress of Anglo- and Mexican-Americans at selected intersections in a South Texas city. Honking at the experimental car within twelve seconds after the traffic light turned green was taken as the measure of aggression.

Findings were that overall aggression in South Texas did not differ from levels reported in the antecedent study; that Mexican-Americans display more overall aggression than do Anglo-Americans; and that there were no significant sex differences in aggression levels. At variance with the published study, present findings were that there was no differential aggression displayed toward high and low status sources of frustration. Analysis of each ethnic group's responses to each frustrating condition (high and low sources) revealed a differential of interest. Anglo-Americans displayed

the "inhibition effect" of high status sources of frustration, in directional agreement with Doob and Gross (1968) but not at a significant level. Mexican-Americans reversed this relationship, displaying slightly more aggression toward the high status source than the low. The combination of these ethnic differences resulted in a finding of significantly greater aggression by Mexican-Americans than by Anglo-Americans when the source of frustration is a high status symbol.

There is need to interpret the findings that Mexican-Americans display higher levels of aggression than Anglo-Americans, and the focus of that aggression is on high status sources of frustration. Particularly in view of the societal definition of this ethnic group as easy-going, tolerant, and unhurried, it might seem that a given 12 second delay would constitute a lesser level of frustration, hence elicit a lesser level of aggression, for that group. The observed behavior, however, is consistent with the theoretical views of Berkowitz and Geen (1966), who point out that frustration creates an arousal, but whether aggression occurs depends on all aspects of the situation, the individual's past experiential and conceptual history of frustration, and specific response cues. The cumulative effect of actual and vicarious frustration experienced by members of this minority may account for the higher levels of aggression displayed by them.

Greater focus of aggression on the high status source of frustration is consistent with the findings of Berkowitz and Knurck (1969) that a frustrated individual tends to act aggressively toward someone, or something, that physically or symbolically resembles the source of his frustrations. This view would suggest that the new, expensive automobile driven by a well-dressed Anglo-American symbolizes, for the minority member, the source of his cumulative frustrations. The finding of greater overall aggression by Mexican-Americans also should be considered as a possible function of the Experimenter's ethnic identity. There is need for systematic variation of this factor in further empirical study to fully test that effect.

In conclusion, findings are that, under the present conditions, no inhibiting effect of high status sources of frustration could be demonstrated in this South Texas city; that Mexican-Americans display higher levels of aggression than do Anglo-Americans; and that the major focus of that differential is in Mexican-American aggression toward the high status source of frustration--a reversal, for this ethnic group, from findings of the antecedent study. This study is offered as another contribution to the growing body of evidence that findings of social factors in human behavior cannot summarily be extended to the bi-cultural area of present interest without taking cultural norms and ethnic memberships into account.

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Reference Notes

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